

Experiences of Psychologists as Psychotherapists in Online Groups: From the Circle to the Screen

Sara Santos Dias Costa¹ e Tales Vilela Santeiro¹

¹ Federal University of Triângulo Mineiro, Department of Psychology, Graduate Program
in Psychology, Uberaba, Minas Gerais, Brazil

Received: November 08, 2026

Accepted: April 06, 2026

Section Editor: Cândida Helena Lopes Alves

Author's Note

Sara S. D. Costa  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1822-0450>

Tales V. Santeiro  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1610-0340>

Financial Support: This study was financed by the Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado de Minas Gerais – FAPEMIG.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Federal University of Triângulo Mineiro, Department of Psychology, Rua Vigário Carlos, n. 100, 5th floor, room 532 – Nossa Senhora da Abadia, 38025350 – Uberaba, MG – Brazil. E-mail: sasantosd@outlook.com

Conflict of Interest: None declared.

Abstract

In recent years, especially since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a notable increase in the demand for online psychological services and psychotherapy. However, scientific publications emphasize individual psychotherapeutic interventions rather than group therapy. This study aimed to investigate the professional practice and experiences in coordinating synchronous online psychotherapeutic groups. This study, involving 12 psychologists, is based on the clinical-qualitative method. Semi-structured interviews, conducted via Google Meet, were used for data production. The number of participants was determined using snowball sampling procedures and the criterion of theoretical saturation. The results demonstrated distinct forms of professional practice driven by peculiarities related to the digital technology landscape and the respective theoretical-technical management linked to patient needs. The development and continuity of online psychotherapeutic work were favored by four main pillars: technological support, personal psychotherapy experience, theoretical study, and supervision. It was also noted that the participants' experiences, initially marked by challenges, were and continue to be reinterpreted as professionals perceive the viability of online therapy and develop new management methods. Future studies could focus on analyzing experiences related to other aspects that permeate the professional practices of conducting online groups, such as asynchronous modalities and their unique clinical challenges.

Keywords: group psychotherapy, online psychotherapy, clinical psychology, mental telehealth, pandemics

VIVÊNCIAS DE PSICÓLOGAS NA CONDUÇÃO DE GRUPOS PSICOTERAPÊUTICOS ON-LINE: DO CÍRCULO PARA A TELA

Vivências na Condução de Grupos Psicoterapêuticos On-line

Resumo

Nos últimos anos, especialmente após a pandemia da COVID-19, houve um notável aumento na demanda por serviços psicológicos on-line, no geral, e também por psicoterapias. As produções científicas, no entanto, têm enfatizado as intervenções psicoterapêuticas individuais em comparação às grupais. O estudo visou investigar a atuação e as vivências profissionais na coordenação de grupos psicoterapêuticos on-line síncronos. Trata-se de um estudo amparado no método clínico-qualitativo, 12 psicólogas participaram. A entrevista semidirigida, realizada por meio do Google Meet, foi estratégia utilizada para a produção de dados. O número de participantes foi definido a partir dos procedimentos de bola de neve e do critério de saturação teórica. Os resultados demonstraram formas distintas de atuação profissional, instigadas por peculiaridades relacionadas ao cenário das tecnologias digitais e ao respectivo manejo teórico-técnico em relação às demandas dos pacientes. O desenvolvimento e a continuidade do trabalho psicoterapêutico online foram favorecidos por quatro eixos principais: suporte tecnológico, vivência de psicoterapia pessoal, estudo teórico e supervisão. Notou-se, ainda, que as vivências das participantes, inicialmente marcadas por desafios, foram e têm sido ressignificadas à medida que as profissionais percebem a viabilidade do on-line e desenvolvem novos modos de manejo. Estudos futuros podem ser focados em análises de vivências sobre outros aspectos que perpassam as práticas profissionais de condução de grupos on-line, como os assíncronos.

Palavras-chave: psicoterapia de grupo, psicoterapia on-line, psicologia clínica, telessaúde mental, pandemias

EXPERIENCIAS DE PSICÓLOGOS EN LA REALIZACIÓN DE GRUPOS PSICOTERAPÉUTICOS ONLINE: DEL CÍRCULO A LA PANTALLA

Experiencias en la realización de grupos psicoterapêuticos online

Resumen

En los últimos años, especialmente tras la pandemia de COVID-19, se ha observado un notable aumento de la demanda de servicios psicológicos on line en general, y también de psicoterapia. Sin embargo, las publicaciones científicas han priorizado las intervenciones psicoterapêuticas individuales frente a las terapias grupales. Este estudio tuvo como objetivo investigar la práctica profesional y las experiencias en la

coordinación de grupos psicoterapéuticos en línea sincrónicos. Se trata de un estudio clínico-cualitativo en el que participaron 12 psicólogos. Para la recopilación de datos se utilizaron entrevistas semiestructuradas, realizadas a través de Google Meet. El número de participantes se determinó mediante procedimientos de muestreo por bola de nieve y el criterio de saturación teórica. Los resultados demostraron distintas formas de práctica profesional, influenciadas por peculiaridades relacionadas con el panorama tecnológico digital y la respectiva gestión teórico-técnica en relación con las necesidades de los pacientes. El desarrollo y la continuidad del trabajo psicoterapéutico en línea se vieron favorecidos por cuatro pilares principales: apoyo tecnológico, experiencia en psicoterapia personal, estudio teórico y supervisión. También se observó que las experiencias de los participantes, inicialmente marcadas por desafíos, fueron y continúan siendo reinterpretadas a medida que los profesionales perciben la viabilidad de la terapia en línea y desarrollan nuevos métodos de gestión. Estudios futuros podrían centrarse en el análisis de experiencias relacionadas con otros aspectos que permean las prácticas profesionales de la gestión de grupos en línea, como los asincrónicos.

Palabras clave: psicoterapia de grupo, psicoterapia en línea, psicología clínica, telesalud mental, pandemias

Psychotherapy is a collaborative method of treatment involving the therapist and the patient. Its general aims are to alleviate psychological suffering and to stimulate the patient's personal development, so that they can achieve a greater degree of satisfaction. There are several modalities of psychotherapy that are distinguished by their objectives, theoretical and technical approaches, among other aspects (Cordioli et al., 2019).

Group psychotherapy originated from the need to extend clinical care to a larger number of people. It developed notably during World War II due to the sudden increase in psychiatric cases and the shortage of staff in hospitals (Fernandes, 2021). Since then, this type of care has proven effective in various contexts (Sousa et al., 2020; The New York Times Magazine, 2023).

The field of psychotherapy is currently reflecting changes in contemporary society by expanding its presence in the digital space. Although there is no consensus in the literature on the term 'online psychotherapy,' it has been used to designate systematic treatment processes mediated by technology for therapeutic purposes. These include synchronous interactions, for example, in psychotherapy conducted via videoconference; and asynchronous interactions, in which therapeutic communication occurs at different times, as happens with the use of emails or instant messages (Serralta & Laskoski, 2023).

In Brazil and worldwide, the transition from in-person to online therapy intensified due to the COVID-19 pandemic, even among professionals who initially showed skepticism and concerns about its effectiveness, sparking a renewed and significant interest in the field (Terra et al., 2024; Weinberg, 2021). Despite the notable growth in the demand for and supply of online psychotherapy in recent years, it is important to highlight that this phenomenon was already in progressive expansion (CFP, 2018, 2020; Serralta & Laskoski, 2023; Terra et al., 2024; Weinberg, 2020a, 2021).

Against the backdrop of Brazil's own transition from in-person to online psychotherapy, Békés and Aafjes-van Doorn (2020) analyzed the attitudes of psychotherapists in the United States, Canada, and Europe regarding the abrupt shift from in-person to online psychotherapy due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Most participants demonstrated favorable attitudes toward this form of care; however, they also identified challenges. These were associated with therapeutic interaction, such as the risks of patient distraction and the psychotherapist's difficulty in feeling connected to the patient; with the physical environment, such as patients' struggles to find a suitable place; and with technical issues, such as internet connection problems.

Online psychotherapy thus implies considering peculiarities like clinical management, structuring the environment, establishing the therapeutic alliance, and the use of the technology itself (Bossi & Sehaparini, 2021; Ferreira et al., 2024; Terra et al., 2024; Weinberg, 2020a, 2021). In this sense, relevant ethical questions arise, such as co-responsibility for confidentiality and the protection of psychological data generated by the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs). Ensuring the security of these processes requires a high-level of encryption and authentication, use of antivirus programs, and an adequate physical environment (Cruz & Labiak, 2021; Donnamaria & Terzis, 2011, 2015; Weinberg, 2020b).

Specifically, online psychotherapy groups present unique particularities that warrant consideration. Prior to this, however, it is important to emphasize that online group interventions began before the COVID-19 pandemic. A notable example is the work of the Israeli researcher Weinberg (2001, 2020b), currently based in the United States and considered a pioneer in online group psychotherapy. He reports having begun his work in this area in 1995 by creating an email list for group psychotherapists worldwide to facilitate the exchange of ideas. Although it was not conventional group psychotherapy, the inherent phenomena resembled typical small group processes.

Based on these experiences, the author published what can be considered the pioneering article on group dynamics in online forums (Weinberg, 2001). He continues with further relevant contributions in the field to this day (Weinberg, 2014, 2020a, 2021). In Brazil, Donnamaria began her studies and defended her doctoral thesis in the early 2010s (Donnamaria & Terzis, 2011, 2015).

Given this very brief historical preamble, the literature includes debates on group cohesion and the importance of online presence for participant interaction (Weinberg, 2001, 2020a, 2020b, 2021), physical limitations of online groups (Donnamaria, 2011, 2015; Santeiro et al., 2021), the use of cameras or not and turning off the microphone during video calls, as well as considerations for the clinical setting (Gomes Júnior & Rocinholi, 2023).

These discussions highlight that, within this intervention format, the face is the most visible element. Facial expressions often appear more pronounced than in a face-to-face context, requiring the psychotherapist to maintain a keen eye for subtle cues (Weinberg, 2020b). The lack of physical contact can also cause estrangement among participants, since, especially until the advent of the pandemic, people were, in general, more accustomed to face-to-face interpersonal relationships and body contact.

Thus, psychotherapists of online groups may experience a feeling of having lost their 'presence,' understood here as the feeling of immersion, attention, and emotional involvement. Despite possible distractions, there are approaches to managing the setting through creative and dynamic strategies, such as encouraging participants to explore their imagination to initiate possible dialogues (Weinberg, 2021).

Given these aspects highlighted in the literature, a central question arises: how have psychology professionals managed and experienced the peculiarities related to conducting online therapy groups? Scientific production suggests that, in online groups, there is no physical proximity in the sense that participants do not literally sit in a circle. However, new experiences emerge, which can be called 'e-ntimacy,' a concept based on fantasy and idealization arising from a relationship established between two – or more – 'non-bodies,' that follow rules specific to internet-mediated interactions, distinct from those governing face-to-face meetings (Weinberg, 2014).

Investigating professional practices in the field of online group psychotherapy is therefore justified, essentially, by favoring a more comprehensive understanding of these aspects that have been the subject of debate in the literature. Questions permeated the investigative process:

how have online group sessions been integrated in the professional and subjective experiences of psychologists? What challenges and potentialities have been observed? In this sense, this study aimed to investigate professional performance and experiences in the coordination of synchronous online psychotherapeutic groups.

Method

This study is based on the clinical-qualitative methodology, which aims to understand the meanings and significance attributed to certain experiences within the context of a given scientific investigation (Turato, 2013).

Participants

Twelve psychologists participated in this study (Table 1). The inclusion criterion required that participants had at least one completed or ongoing experience conducting online psychotherapeutic groups. Given that, in Brazil, group therapy is not common in psychotherapy practices, it was hypothesized that finding group psychotherapists who conducted work online would be challenging. Consequently, no exclusion criteria were applied in order to broaden the conditions for participation. It should be noted that, throughout the data production process, this hypothesis was confirmed (see Procedures).

To ensure anonymity, the identity of all interviewees is hidden using fictitious names. All participants self-identified as cisgender women, aged between 26 and 53 years (mean: 35.8 years) (Table 1). Most were professionals based in the southeastern region of Brazil ($n = 8$; 66.6%). Regarding self-declared ethnicity/racial identity, the majority were White ($n = 5$; 41.6%). Regarding the year of graduation, there was a predominance of participants who graduated in the 2010s ($n = 8$) with most of the sample graduating from private institutions ($n = 8$; 66.6%) and holding postgraduate degrees ($n = 6$; 50%).

Table 1
Characteristics of the participants, according to the order of the interviews

Participant (Fictitious name)	Age (years)	Race/ color	Region	Education Institution Category *	Graduation year	Post- graduation	Time Working with groups	Time Working with on-line groups
Maria	32	Other	Southeast	Public	2014	E [#]	2014	2020
Maia	27	Mixed†	Southeast	Private	2018	--	2018	2023
Vivian	30	Other	Southeast	Private	2019	E [#]	2019	2022
Paloma	53	Mixed†	Southeast	Private	2013	--	2020	2020
Karem	45	White	Southeast	Private	2002	E [#]	2016	2017
Susana	32	Other	Southeast	Public	2018	M [@]	2017	2020
Rebeca	32	Mixed†	Northeast	Public	2014	E [#]	2014	2020
Renata	37	White	Northeast	Public	2010	D [%]	2012	2023
Nicole	39	White	Northeast	Private	2008	E [#]	2008	2020
Laura	26	White	Northeast	Private	2021	--	2021	2023
Nina	30	White	Southeast	Private	2015	E [#]	2016	2023
Paula	47	Mixed†	Southeast	Private	1998	--	2019	2020

Note. * Education Institution Category: #: Specialization; @: Master's degree %: PhD.; †: Parda – mixed race

In line with their graduation dates, the participants' group therapy experience reflects a sample primarily composed of professionals who entered the field in the 2010s. This connection emerged prominently during the interviews; when reflecting on their initial practical experiences with group processes, participants frequently recalled their undergraduate training. Experience with online groups began predominantly in the 2020s, specifically in 2020 (n = 6) and 2023 (n = 4). These initial experiences were attributed to the pandemic period and the subsequent expansion of online psychological services.

Interviewer

The interviewer is a 24-year-old Master's student in Psychology, who identifies as a cisgender Black woman. Based in the southeastern region of Brazil, she graduated in psychology from a public institution in 2022; she is part of a research group focused on group practices, in which she has dedicated herself to working with online groups.

Strategy for accessing experiences

Data production occurred through a semi-structured interview, employing a two-part structure: (1) personal data for interviewee identification (full name, age, sex, gender, race/ethnicity, state of residence, etc.); and (2) questions about the study objectives (How do your online group sessions take place? What has it been like for you to lead online groups? et cetera.).

Because it was a semi-structured interview, there were moments when new questions arose from the interviewees' narratives. For example, it explored whether participants with experience in both formats perceived differences between the conduction of in-person and online groups, and if so, the nature of those differences. The answers to some of the new questions were interwoven into the narratives exemplified in the Results section. In addition, the interviewer recorded observations and self-reflection, documenting participant reactions and the researcher's own subjective impressions during the encounters.

Procedures

The interviews were conducted using Google Meet. They took place in two stages. In the first stage, a preliminary interview for acculturation purposes was carried out (Turato, 2013). At this stage, the professional meeting the inclusion criterion was invited to participate, allowing the researcher to become familiar with and acclimatize to the research field. The second stage consisted of the actual data production, with another professional indicated by the first interviewee being invited, according to the snowball sampling method (Turato, 2013).

Regarding the snowball sampling method, it is important to note that most interviewees did not provide potential names of fellow psychotherapists. This hindered the recruitment process and required the sampling chain to be restarted six times. Ultimately, 28 psychology graduates were contacted, 14 of whom agreed to participate. Furthermore, when names were provided, they did not always meet the inclusion criterion. For example, although two individuals consented to participate, it was noted during the interview process that their work experience was related to other types of groups, such as reading groups or those focused on information about the LGBTQIAPN+ population, and therefore did not necessarily have psychotherapeutic purposes.

Following this process, the number of participants interviewed was determined by the criterion of theoretical saturation (Turato, 2013). Twelve relevant interviews were recorded and transcribed in full to be submitted to data analysis; these transcriptions constitute the analytical corpus of the study. Data production lasted six months, beginning in August 2023 and ending in January 2024. The average interview time was 51 minutes (ranging from 40 to 90 minutes).

Data analysis and interpretation

Content analysis was conducted in five stages: (1) Preliminary preparation of the material (transcribing interviews and the interviewer's field notes to data repositories); (2) Pre-analysis (performing a floating reading to identify 'unspoken' elements within the discourse); (3) Categorization and subcategorization (organizing data and identifying themes by relevance and repetition, with categories defined a posteriori); (4) External validation (supervision of interviews with a supervisor and subsequent discussion of results within the authors' affiliated research group); and (5) Presentation and interpretation of results (descriptive analysis supported by excerpts from participants' narratives) (Turato, 2013). Consequently, data interpretation occurred through dialogue with the literature indicated in the introduction.

Ethical considerations

This study is linked to the research project “Social Media and the Training of Psychologists in Clinical and Health Processes,” approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Federal University of Goiás (Process No. 26870314.8.0000.5083).

Results and Discussions

Following the analysis of the corpus and in view of the research questions, two primary thematic categories emerged: (1) Challenges and potentialities of online group psychotherapy services; and (2) Psychologists' experiences with online psychotherapy groups.

Challenges and potential of online group psychotherapy sessions

Different forms of professional practice in online psychotherapeutic groups were identified. To some extent, the participants' accounts were similar to their experiences conducting face-to-face groups. Thus, the answers to the question “How do your sessions take place?” were close to perspectives focused on the literature of group processes, insofar as groups can differ in terms of setting in respect to different aspects, such as objectives, theoretical-technical orientation, duration of meetings, etc. (Cordioli et al., 2019). The following narrative illustrates this issue:

I created two different groups. One was for women and self-discovery; it was a specific target audience. And the second was for women and men who were planning to have children. We set a maximum of ten people in both the self-discovery and parenting groups because we understood that more than that would make it unsustainable for everyone to have a say, because we didn't want anyone to feel excluded. (Maria)

In this sense, contractual issues commonly arose when the professionals described how these sessions took place. Beyond the usual recommendations stipulated by the Federal Council of Psychology (CFP), such as agreements on the time, confidentiality, fees, and payment methods, two crucial contractual rules for the development of online groups were mentioned: the physical environment where the participants would be and the use of cameras. This was evident in the dialogues with some participants, as illustrated below.

I set a few more rules, for example. I ask that people be in a closed room or wearing headphones. However, and there will always be a ‘however,’ because I know, okay? For example, I work with women, I understand that women sometimes have young children who require attention, so this contract will also require a certain amount of flexibility from me. (Nicole)

I would start the group chat and say, “Look, everyone, preferably with your cameras turned on. But if you want to leave them turned off because the baby is sleeping, just let me know.” Most of them were fine with it, but as the baby gets older, they usually end up turning off the camera because they have to keep running around the house with the child. (Paula)

Depending on the activity we were going to do, I would ask them to turn on [the camera], to provide that support of... getting to know each other. But we would agree on that, right? At the beginning of the group. If it would be comfortable for everyone. If they agreed to it. Some activities required turning on the camera. "Oh, but I'm in my pajamas," "I don't want to appear on camera," "I'm not dressed up enough." So, there was this aspect of not wanting to turn on the camera. (Rebeca)

Reports such as these prompt reflections on the technical flexibility required in the context of online care. Although agreements can be established beforehand, certain unforeseen realities emerge that demand the professional to adapt their skills to the participant's immediate environment. Gomes Júnior and Rocinholi (2023), based on their experiences with online groups, stress that, unlike what is observed in face-to-face care, participation in an online group involves inhabiting different environments simultaneously: the videoconference screen and the individual territories of each participant. Consequently, the camera reveals that part of the group's space is composed of the physical environment in which the members are located, framed by the angles of their faces. This type of debate and professional experience underscores the importance of reflecting on professional boundaries in online services, requiring careful and consistent consideration across all aspects of practice.

In this regard, Santeiro and Rocha (2015) pose the question: In the virtual world, where boundaries tend to blur, does it make sense to think that professionals are supported, or would we be at a point where reconsiderations and reinventions are necessary? Bringing this type of question to the forefront is fundamental, as it is invariably part of the daily lives of psychotherapists, especially since the pandemic.

In addition to environmental factors and the technical handling of technology, it is equally important to consider how emotional elements emerge within the online setting. These elements are intrinsic to a therapeutic frame mediated by digital resources, as suggested by the following testimony:

We know that, unfortunately, the population sees a lot of self-esteem as something external; some [participants] didn't turn on their cameras. Of the five [participants] there, sometimes two or three turned on their cameras. It was difficult for them to start showing themselves more (Maia).

The following question arose based on this account by Maia, the coordinator of a group work focused on the theme of self-esteem: in a group focused on self-esteem, can the choice not to turn on the camera and thus not to show one's own face be dissociated from the very purposes of the group work in question? In situations like these, appropriate theoretical and technical management is fundamental for the group process to yield meaningful therapeutic benefits for its members.

Regarding theoretical and technical guidance, the participants cited different approaches, such as psychoanalysis, psychodrama, art therapy, cognitive-behavioral therapy, person-centered

therapy, gestalt therapy, and behavior analysis. Because these schools of thought were conceived in face-to-face contexts, their transition to ICT-mediated scenarios raises reflections on the possibilities of group management in online environments. The following testimony illustrates this aspect:

I experienced profound frustration. I really want to do the psychodrama in person, because I am a psycho-dramatist. To experience it online? No way!" I was very frustrated at first, it took me a while to accept it, and it was a big challenge for the instructors as well, because psychodramatists work in person. The instructors had difficulty managing the technological aspect. How am I going to change a game that is in-person to an online [setting]? So, I also saw this difficulty they had in relation to that, but the process was very enriching, because we realized that it is possible to dramatize online, we can... I don't know, sometimes you don't see the whole body, but then you get up, walk around your space. We're going to use techniques, so we use a lot of techniques from double psychodrama, inversion, mirroring, soliloquy, and so on. (Vivian)

In addition to the technical aspects of online psychotherapy groups, participants highlighted the use of certain tools. For example:

I also do some art therapy work, and then they [the patients] need to use the resources they have at home. That has also been interesting because, before, I gave them the resources. I had my Faber Castell collection. Now, I need to deal with their resources. It's very metaphorical, the internal resources of each person. Because, in the end, that's what therapy is, isn't it? You're not there to solve the person's life. They need to rely on the resources they have in their daily lives. (Renata)

Once, I put on some music, a video, I've forgotten the name of the song now... We have several tools: polls, whiteboard, themed rooms. So, I say: "Guys, I'm going to send you to another room, you have 10 minutes there to get to know each other a little," I divide them randomly, they [the patients] would go to another room and come back [to the main session]. (Vivian)

Consequently, a variety of strategies emerged to address the specific physical limitations of online sessions. These ranged from technological tools provided by the digital platforms themselves (with emphasis on Google Meet and Zoom, as mentioned by the participants), to the use of conventional psychotherapeutic techniques, albeit adapted to the digital frame. When it came to the use of technological tools, a panorama full of particularities, challenges, and potential was observed.

Regarding the difficulties of online groups, two distinct scenarios emerged in the participants' narratives: (1) technical difficulties related to digital technologies; and (2) clinical difficulties related to the technical handling of patient demands. The first is illustrated in the following testimonies:

Online, it's through a screen; you can get to the person's inner self, so to speak, but sometimes the person becomes more withdrawn. In person, it seems like the person has more focus; being online sometimes takes away that focus. Sometimes there's noise, someone calling, they turn off their camera, and so on... is the person there or not? A situation like that happened to me. I asked each one about a situation, I don't remember exactly what it was, then I said, "So-and-so, and you?", and I was like, "So-and-so, are you there?", and all the girls were there with their cameras off. I said, "Well, I think she must be busy." (Maia)

It's difficult to compete with the stimuli of home, because individual online therapy sessions are 50 minutes long. You spend 50 minutes on the computer talking to someone, so in a way you're not competing as much. When you're in a group and someone is talking and you want to speak, but then you're afraid of interrupting someone else, and then you start looking at WhatsApp. (...) To lead an online group, you need something very structured, you have to have a script, you know? You have to have something very structured. In-person groups are different; they're very organic, they build themselves, you evolve with them. Online groups, I think, are much more difficult to build. (Maria)

The difficulty in maintaining an online presence emerged as one of the challenges in the clinical practices of the interviewees. Therefore, it is essential to reflect on the impact of ICTs on human development, aligned with the cognitive dispersion of operating multiple social media simultaneously, resulting in a possible loss of quality in attention and perception (Oliveira & Barroco, 2023). This is fundamental because group psychotherapy aims, among other things, to create a space where self-knowledge, personal change, and listening to oneself and others are inherent. Thus, when Maia asks, "Is the person here or not?", it can serve as a starting point for reflections, both literally and symbolically, on participation in the group's online work.

Weinberg (2020a) discusses the concept of therapeutic presence as one of the main practical issues for online psychotherapists, since it is essential for positive outcomes in the group sessions offered in this modality. Although the author emphasizes this concept, stressing the importance of therapists committing themselves physically, emotionally, and cognitively to their patients, attention is drawn to the presence of group members. This presence affects the relationship between psychotherapist and patients/group, as well as the group process as a whole. Accordingly, according to Weinberg (2020a), therapeutic presence, although traditionally involving the body, can also be perceived through subjective elements that constitute the relational experience in the online environment.

Furthermore, the participants' narratives converge with how ICTs operate today, with varied content and application options that are constantly changing, shaping perceptions and communication processes. Thus, as platforms evolve, they change habits, customs, and behaviors (Oliveira & Barroco, 2023). This evolution helps to reflect on Maria's narrative when she points to the need for a structured script or a specific focus in an online group to avoid distractions, such as household stimuli and the variability of digital content.

Other narratives related to the difficulties of managing technologies, such as internet connection outages, generational difficulties, and the environment in which the group participates,

touched on ethical issues, parallel to the debates on professional confidentiality that the specialized literature has addressed (Bossi & Sehaparini, 2021; Cruz & Labiak, 2021):

I heard from my colleagues: "But what if the internet goes down, what if it freezes?" There's this online issue, and I say: "Guys, if it goes down, we have to wait." Everyone, not just us. We give it some time, we stretch our time, and if it doesn't come back, we suggest another time, right? (Laura)

The technical difficulties, right? The internet... going down out of nowhere. Sometimes it's the older person, who has more difficulty using technology, that also has problems. The biggest difficulty is the technical one. I even thought that the connection would be more difficult, right? When the first online group started, but I didn't observe any difficulty in the connection; neither while supervising nor in the group in which I participated. (Susana)

Regarding the difficulties related to the theoretical and technical management of patient needs, some participants reported the following situations:

The difficulty lies mainly in the thoughts they have about themselves, which is one of the fundamental points of CBT [Cognitive Behavioral Therapy]. Whether we like it or not, this greatly interferes with self-esteem. So, whenever I focused on beliefs, on their self-image, changing those thoughts was more difficult. (Maia)

Actually, it was a situation that made me think, "Oh my God," I took this to the congress to work on. It was a patient who was in individual therapy with me [before referring her to a group], and she said, "Oh, I don't feel like I belong in this group, I don't want to be here, I don't see the point, and so on." And at that moment I thought, "Oh my God, is there any way I can leave?" (Vivian)

Thus, it is evident that online groups present common demands or situations that require theoretical and technical management, similar to traditional psychotherapy. In this respect, attention is drawn to the training processes of psychology professionals; there is a clear need to include a specific focus on online group clinical care. Another aspect presented in the interviews encompasses the participants' perspective on online groups, beyond their difficulties, as is illustrated below:

There is progress within the group, there is an exchange of experiences, in the sense of belonging. "I belong to this," feeling welcomed. And this optimizes psychotherapeutic results. For example, each person has a certain amount of time in clinical care, but when you are in a therapeutic group the progress is greater because it's not just the therapist, it is the life and history of each participant that will greatly enhance it. (Paloma)

There's this thing about being able to bring together people from different parts of the world. So, you're not limited to having patients only in your neighborhood or your city. Anyone has the potential to be your patient, if they're aligned with the approach you're taking. (Karem)

It's possible, it works just like in-person [sessions], there's bond building, there's the formation of all those group theories, it happens online. We can achieve the objective; we can provide support. It's possible and there isn't much difference in relation to the theories. The difference is a little bit in the setting, the management of the setting, the ethical issues that change a bit. (Nina)

In this way, the participants' testimonies encompass the possibilities and potential not only of the online groups themselves, especially when they mention words like welcoming, belonging, and building bonds, but also of the use of ICTs as a means of communication with significant reach, thus promoting greater accessibility to psychological services.

Finally, it is worth highlighting that, while the participants discussed forms of action, challenges, and potential, as presented earlier, they primarily shared their experiences, meanings, and the significance attributed to the practice, as will be detailed below.

Psychologists' experiences with online psychotherapy groups

Before presenting the results and discussion on this issue, it is important to stress its interconnection with the previously reported findings. From this perspective, by exemplifying some narratives, it is possible to note that, at certain moments, the participants contemplated previously discussed themes. However, it is this panorama, characterized by recurring themes, by examples, by the challenges and potentialities identified, that illustrates how experiences with online psychotherapeutic groups have evolved. While most groups began during the pandemic (see Table 1), they have been re-signified as a viable psychotherapeutic modality, and no longer as an imposed condition of social distancing. The following interview excerpts illustrate this aspect:

I've made peace with online therapy, you know? We were forced, during the pandemic, to learn how to be therapists using this format. But it was never my idea. It was never my desire. But, after learning, after seeing that it works, that psychotherapeutic processes happen, transformations happen, I realized this wasn't limited to the pandemic period. (Renata)

It was thanks to the possibility of being online that everyone was there. Online as an opportunity, not as a last resort, you know? "There's nothing else we can do, we use online." It's because of the internet that we could be together. We kind of redefined that, you know? It's a good thing we have online so we can be here talking. (Nina)

Thus, what was observed in the narratives were experiences initially marked by a series of challenges and difficulties, because, as suggested by Donnamaria's pioneering studies (2011, 2015), few Brazilian psychotherapists had experience with synchronous group psychotherapeutic processes before the pandemic. Consequently, the subtitle 'from the circle to the screen,' a phrase coined by Weinberg (2020b), is a reference to the experiences of the psychologists who,

based on their in-person practices, transitioned to online resources, thereby triggering continuous reflections between the two modalities, as illustrated below:

At first, it's a challenge, right? Because I was coming from the experience of in-person meetings, everyone there and all that. It was difficult in that sense. And the screen is also tiring, I think that the time that an in-person group can sometimes last, I feel I need to limit the online one because people get more tired, both with this screen thing and with the lighting. So, we're learning to deal with these things that... in-person, no, we don't need to deal with, because we're there, right? In a controlled environment, alone. There aren't these interferences. (Rebeca)

Based on the challenges identified by the participants, it is worth highlighting some elements that helped in the development and continuity of synchronous group psychotherapy, in order to contribute to the training processes of group psychotherapists, both those who wish to start in online care and those who already work in this context. These can be organized into four thematic pillars: (1) technological support and the participation of the people who were part of the group work; (2) personal psychotherapy within the group psychotherapy modality; (3) theoretical study; and (4) supervision, shared coordination and exchange of experiences with other professionals in psychology and related areas.

The first aspect, technological support, offered the psychologists the necessary conditions to develop their work in a fluid and effective way. Here, however, it is understood in a double sense: both as the ability to operate digital platforms and as a way to assist group members in adverse situations, such as internet connection failures. It is in this second sense that the active engagement of the group can be fostered and managed. This promotes greater fluidity within the session and aligns with current theoretical discussions regarding the nature of online presence (Weinberg, 2020a, 2020b).

As psychologists are integral parts of the psychotherapeutic groups in question, it is also important to emphasize personal psychotherapy (Thematic pillar 2) as an essential element. This underscores the importance of experiencing the group process not only from the facilitator's perspective but also from the subjective position of the patient. This allows for a deeper reflection of the respective implications of this self-care practice in the personal and professional experiences of psychologists, as illustrated in the following testimony:

I think participating in training programs is very important, but honestly, understanding training as something broader than just theoretical study, it's essential to participate in groups. We need to experience it firsthand, in our bodies. Being in that other place is also part of the training. You need to understand what it's like to be part of a group that is being built, how to build bonds, how to deal with obstacles, the problems that always arise, the grudges, the petty squabbles when the group is very heterogeneous. So, we need to have that feeling. We need to know what it's like to be in that place of sharing something very profound, of feeling understood, of feeling welcomed in that dimension. (Nicole)

Furthermore, a continuous learning process was observed in the area, even among professionals with years of experience. In Nicole's testimony, for example, she linked the 'theoretical study' factor to the others (Thematic pillar 3).

Thus, it is worth highlighting the generational distinctions noted in the narratives of the interviewees and, above all, how much they contemplated different perspectives of their experiences. Karem, with 22 years of professional experience, questioned herself in a way that she considers gratifying and unusual:

How did we arrive at this possibility, of each one, from their own home, being able to do therapy? I, at 45 years old, who lived in another era, this is surreal to me.

While Laura, who graduated during the pandemic, emphasized:

I think that, due to the dense experience of graduation, it is somewhat comfortable [to work online].

These narratives, therefore, constitute meanings that have been gradually constructed around professional practice. Even so, unspoken aspects can be considered. Based on the first author's observational and self-observational data collected during the interviews, clear distinctions emerged between the participants' accounts, reflecting the uniqueness of each discourse. While some participants offered more detailed accounts of the meanings of their experiences, others focused more on describing how the group was led, and from this, it was possible to glean clues about the professional implications.

Thus, it is clear that the 'unspoken' was associated with participants who, at times, affirmed one thing and, at other times, mentioned the opposite. An example of this is that, although some stated that they had not encountered any difficulties in conducting the groups, later, when questioned about the resources that helped them, they mentioned a lack of support, people, and tools that could assist them (Thematic pillar 4). These nuances complemented each other as the interviewees recounted the experiences mentioned earlier, reflecting on the individual support they received and support networks.

Regarding these observations, Gomes Júnior and Rocinholi (2023) stress the importance of not imposing a specific way of being in the online group, but emphasize the relevance of psychotherapists sharing their own impressions with group members, in order to build a comfortable way of meeting and, if necessary, reassessing the therapeutic contract. In their words, a "comfortable, light, and possible way of meeting" (Gomes Júnior & Rocinholi, 2023, p. 9). After all, each participant is influenced by and constructs their experiences in a different physical space, with distinct environmental interferences; the same holds true for the psychotherapist.

Thus, the transition from the circle to a lived and dialogued screen with the participants implies recognizing both the similarities to in-person work and the distinctions of the digital setting. These include the nature of the relationships that are built, the feelings and sensations

of maintaining an online presence, and the therapeutic contract. In this light, these professional experiences, although initially marked by challenges and doubts, allowed the participants to reflect on the paths and possibilities for practice, making it a dynamic and perpetually evolving space-under-construction.

Final Considerations

This study investigated the experiences and professional practice of female psychologists in conducting synchronous online psychotherapeutic groups. The results indicate that while the initial shift toward leading online groups was largely compelled by the pandemic, these experiences have since been re-signified as viable psychotherapeutic possibilities. The processes experienced presented distinct configurations in terms of the target audience, objectives, resources, and underlying theoretical and technical orientations.

Contractual aspects and those that make up the setting were recurring themes throughout the data production process. In this context, privacy within the group members' environment and the use of cameras were highlighted. The analysis of the experiences also demonstrated that the participants faced difficulties related to the digital environment in dealing with the demands and suffering inherent to their patients' life moments, but above all, in managing and maintaining their online presence. On the other hand, acceptance, belonging, building bonds, and accessibility were cited as strengths.

Although the interviewees initially faced professional challenges, their daily practice gradually fostered reflection on new possibilities for action and support. This was twofold: as they refined their ability to lead online groups, they ensured that patients received necessary care while simultaneously sustaining their own professional livelihoods. Initially, this transition was marked by a constant, pressing uncertainty regarding whether their digital practice truly aligned with their professional ideals and clinical capabilities.

The manner in which the interview processes were conducted involved devices that articulated a collaborative thinking process: interviewer and participants seeking to construct meanings and significance for something that still seemed to require more subjective time for 'processing' and maturation. While the pandemic created an urgent need for professional readiness, the actual scope of what could be achieved only became clear through the reflections generated during the interviews themselves.

Despite these limitations, there were no dropouts among the participants in this study, indicating their willingness and openness to collaborate with the research. Future research could therefore focus on broadening the participant profile. Analyses of other experiences that permeate professional practices, such as other forms of online communication, which, like asynchronous group psychotherapy processes, could also expand the findings. In this sense, focusing on the interactions between online group psychotherapists and their patients via WhatsApp and Instagram could yield significant new insights. These platforms are among the

most widely used in Brazil and globally and do not merely provide synchronous and asynchronous support; they are ubiquitously integrated into the daily lives of both psychologists and patients.

Acknowledgments:

This article is the result of the dissertation by the author Sara S. D. Costa.

References

- Békés, V., & Aafjes-van Doorn, K. (2020). Psychotherapists' attitudes toward online therapy during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Psychotherapy Integration*, 30(2), 238–247. <https://doi.org/10.1037/int0000214>
- Bossi, T. J., & Schaparin, I. (2021). Desafios na transição dos atendimentos psicoterápicos presenciais para on-line na pandemia de COVID-19: Revisão sistemática. *Revista Brasileira de Psicoterapia*, 23(1), 157–165. <https://doi.org/10.5935/2318-0404.20210012>
- Conselho Federal de Psicologia. (2018). *Resolução nº 11, de 11 de maio de 2018*. <https://site.cfp.org.br/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/RESOLU%C3%87%C3%83O-N%C2%BA-11-DE-11-DE-MAIO-DE-2018.pdf>
- Conselho Federal de Psicologia. (2020). *Resolução nº 04, de 26 de março de 2020*. <https://www.in.gov.br/en/web/dou/-/resolucao-n-4-de-26-de-marco-de-2020-250189333>
- Cordioli, A. V., & cols. (2019). *Psicoterapias: Abordagens atuais*. Artmed. (Note: APA usually prefers listing up to 20 authors, but in Brazilian context, “et al.” or “cols.” is common in the book cover; for strict APA, list the main editors).
- Cruz, R. M., & Labiak, F. P. (2021). Implicações éticas na psicoterapia on-line em tempos de Covid-19. *Revista Psicologia e Saúde*, 13(3), 203–216. <https://dx.doi.org/10.20435/pssa.v13i3.1576>
- Donnamaria, C. P., & Terzis, A. (2011). Experimentando o dispositivo terapêutico de grupo via internet: Primeiras considerações de manejo e desafios éticos. *Revista da SPAGESP*, 12(2), 17–26. http://pepsic.bvsalud.org/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1677-29702011000200003
- Donnamaria, C. P., & Terzis, A. (2015). Atendimento psicológico via internet: uma experiência com grupos. In T. V. Santeiro & G. M. A. Rocha (Orgs.), *Clínica de orientação psicanalítica: Compromissos, sonhos e inspirações no processo de formação* (pp. 153–173). Vetor.
- Fernandes, B. S. (2021). Psicoterapia de grupo: Sua origem, seus caminhos. In T. V. Santeiro, G. M. A. Rocha, & C. A. Serralha (Orgs.), *Clínica de grupos de inspiração psicanalítica: Teoria, prática e pesquisa* (pp. 31–43). Clínica Psicológica da Universidade Estadual de Londrina.
- Ferreira, L. R., Santeiro, T. V., & Serralha, C. A. (2024). Psicoterapia infantil on-line: Experiências de psicólogos de orientação psicanalítica durante a pandemia de COVID-19. *Estilos da Clínica*, 29(2), 200–219. <https://doi.org/10.11606/issn.1981-1624.v29i2p200-219>
- Gomes Júnior, D. A. M., & Rocinholi, L. F. (2023). A invenção de um setting on-line para atendimento psicológico remoto. *Psicologia: Ciência e Profissão*, 43, e255712. <https://doi.org/10.1590/1982-3703003255712>
- Oliveira, F. A. F., & Barroco, S. M. S. (2023). Revolução tecnológica e smartphone: Considerações sobre a constituição do sujeito contemporâneo. *Psicologia em Estudo*, 28, e51648. <https://doi.org/10.4025/psi-colestud.v28i0.51648>
- Santeiro, T. V., & Rocha, G. M. A. (2015). Uso de mídias sociais por psicoterapeutas: Problematisando fronteiras profissionais e esboçando diretrizes. In T. V. Santeiro & G. M. A. Rocha (Orgs.), *Clínica de orientação psicanalítica: Compromissos, sonhos e inspirações no processo de formação* (pp. 175–191). Vetor.
- Santeiro, T. V., Rocha, G. M. A., & Serralha, C. A. (2021). Reflexões teórico-técnicas sobre processo grupal on-line desenvolvido em contexto pandêmico. *Revista Brasileira de Psicoterapia*, 23(3), 177–194. <https://cdn.publisher.gn1.link/rbp.celg.org.br/pdf/v23n3a14.pdf>

- Serralta, F. B., & Laskoski, P. B. (2023). Psicoterapia breve on-line. In G. M. Rocha, T. V. Santeiro, & C. A. Serralha (Orgs.), *Psicoterapias breves: Aspectos gerais e propostas contemporâneas aplicadas no Brasil* (pp. 107–130). Vetor.
- Sousa, J. M., Silva, A. C., & cols. (2020). Effectiveness of therapeutic groups in psychosocial care: Analysis in the light of Yalom's therapeutic factors. *Revista Brasileira de Enfermagem*, 73, e20200410. <https://doi.org/10.1590/0034-7167-2020-0410>
- Terra, G. S., Santeiro, T. V., & Couto, V. V. D. (2024). Experiências on-line de psicoterapeutas de orientação psicanalítica durante a pandemia. *Psicologia: Teoria e Prática*, 26(1), ePTPCP15666. <https://doi.org/10.5935/1980-6906/ePTPCP15666>
- The New York Times Magazine. (2023, May 16). *Does Therapy Really Work? Let's Unpack That*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/16/magazine/does-therapy-work.html>
- Turato, E. R. (2013). *Tratado da metodologia da pesquisa clínico-qualitativa: Construção teórico-epistemológica, discussão comparada e aplicação nas áreas da saúde e humanas*. Vozes.
- Weinberg, H. (2001). Group process and group phenomena on the Internet. *International Journal of Group Psychotherapy*, 51, 361–378. <https://doi.org/10.1521/ijgp.51.3.361.49881>
- Weinberg, H. (2014). *The paradox of internet groups: Alone in the presence of virtual others*. Karnac.
- Weinberg, H. (2020a). *Theory and practice of online therapy: Internet-delivered interventions for individuals, groups, families, and organizations*. Routledge.
- Weinberg, H. (2020b). Online group psychotherapy: Challenges and possibilities during COVID-19 – A practice review. *Group Dynamics: Theory, Research, and Practice*, 24(3), 201–211. <https://doi.org/10.1037/gdn0000140>
- Weinberg, H. (2021). Obstacles, challenges, and benefits of online group psychotherapy. *American Journal of Psychotherapy*, 74, 83–88. <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.psychotherapy.20200034>

Contribution of each author to the work:

Sara Santos Dias Costa: Conceptualization, Investigation, Formal Analysis, Methodology, Project Administration, Writing – Original Draft, Review and Editing.

Tales Vilela Santeiro: Conceptualization, Formal Analysis, Supervision, Validation, Writing – Review and Editing.

EDITORIAL BOARD

Editor-in-chief

Alexandre Luiz de Oliveira Serpa

Associated editors

Alessandra Gotuzo Seabra
Ana Alexandra Caldas Osório
Cristiane Silvestre de Paula
Luiz Renato Rodrigues Carreiro
Maria Cristina Triguero Veloz Teixeira

Section editors

"Psychological Assessment"

André Luiz de Carvalho Braule Pinto
Danielle de Souza Costa
Natália Becker
Lisandra Borges Vieira Lima
Luiz Renato Rodrigues Carreiro
Thatiana Helena de Lima

"Psychology and Education"

Carlo Schmidt
Kátia Carvalho Amaral Faro
Natália Martins Dias

"Social Psychology and Population's Health"

Fernanda Maria Munhoz Salgado
Gabriel Gaudencio do Rêgo
João Gabriel Maracci Cardoso

"Clinical Psychology"

Cândida Helena Lopes Alves
Loraine Seixas Ferreira
Vinicius Pereira de Sousa

"Human Development"

Ana Alexandra Caldas Osório
Cristiane Silvestre de Paula
João Rodrigo Maciel Portes

Review Articles

Jessica Mayumi Maruyama

Technical support

Maria Gabriela Maglio
Davi Mendes

EDITORIAL PRODUCTION

Publishing coordination

Surane Chiliani Vellenich

Language editor

Daniel Leão

Layout designer

Studio Acqua